

1 Comment

VB verfassungsblog.de/eu-friendly-poland-showed-little-voter-turnout-ep-elections/

The day after the elections to the European Parliament I have asked my Erasmus law students about the results in their home countries. I thought that these model EU citizens, holders of a specific European identity, should have interesting views on what has happened last weekend. I was surprised that half of them did not know any results whatsoever. They seemed not to be interested in the EP elections. I did not dare to ask how many casted a vote. Maybe I did not want to know the truth. Most probably, living during a Erasmus year in another EU states may create a distance to your local constituency. If you do not participate in daily political life you do not have an incentive to check what is really going on in your home country, especially if your Polish friends do not talk about it almost at all.

In fact the Polish campaign to the European Parliament elections already indicated that the turnout would be low (finally – 23.82%). Except for some incidents it was quite boring. Just to note – there was not even one publicly broadcasted debate between leaders of the parties. Both leading parties thought that it is not in their political interest to risk participation in such debate. The experience shows that such debates, viewed by millions of voters, were usually an important component of elections.

During the campaign politicians did not even try to explain to general population what competences the European Parliament has. There were general slogans like „70% of binding law is created in the European Parliament“, but no real attempt to clarify how such laws affect the daily life of citizens. Instead, political parties concentrated on purely domestic issues or prepared TV commercials which had to be funny, attractive to viewers, but at the same time superficial and not touching upon substance of the EU integration.

An interesting example is the use of the topic of same-sex marriage during the campaign. Somehow the approach to this topic became a dividing line between them. On the right side of political scene there was a competition which party is more homophobic. The slogan in a public commercial of one party „No for Homo“ was the most egregious hate speech example. On the other hand, left-wing parties disputed which rights should be associated with same-sex marriage and whether such couples should have a right to adopt children. Politicians know that creating a controversy about LGBT issues gives them space and attention in media. But nobody dares to mention that it is not the EU competence to regulate such issues and that such discussion should be reserved for national elections.

The EP elections in Poland were the first in a row. In autumn 2014 there will be local elections and in 2015 national elections. Therefore, political parties treated them as a kind of preliminary battle. They tested different domestic issues, checking public reactions and attitudes. Issues strongly related with the European integration were not on the headlines. The ruling party concentrated on creating „strong Poland in a secure Europe“ and on attempts to push for the energy union in the EU. It was a direct reaction to the Ukrainian crisis, but still steered mostly by purely Polish political interests, and not the paramount vision of the European integration. Just to mention, there was almost no discussion about future of the EU budget, Eurozone, joint military, immigration policies, cooperation of courts etc. In fact the only party which had a pro-European complex programme („Your Movement and Europe+“) landed below 5% threshold.

I was surprised that during electoral campaign no party has even tried to use the momentum created by the milestone CJ EU judgments on right to privacy (*Digital Rights Ireland* and *Google Spain*) and by the Draft EU Data Protection Regulation. I am not naive. I know that this topic is too sophisticated to attract masses. However, it was Poland where ACTA protests involved participation of thousands of young voters, so there is a certain potential for building a public discourse on challenges of new technologies, regulation of internet, threats to privacy and role of the EU law. It seems, however, that politicians did not want to bother with those issues and to explain what the EU law may really mean for the life of average citizens. As a result, young voters voted predominantly for the most populist candidate – Janusz Korwin-Mikke – who had anti-systemic, anti-European and nationalistic program. His radical statements were easy to understand, but his success (7.15% of votes and four MEPs elected) was a result of the major political parties inability to speak to young voters.

There are also certain sociological reasons of the low elections' turnout. According to the study by Professor Henryk Domański on social structure, possibilities of social advancement are much lower as compared to early years of the Polish transformation. Therefore, a significant part of the population does not have any trust in a political system and contest it. Non-participation in elections is a symbolic way to do that. Moreover, Polish society is still a beneficiary of the European integration. We take advantage of the output legitimacy of the system. EU money has a substantial impact on the situation of farmers, infrastructure investments (highways, railway, modern buildings, renovation of cities) or numerous social cohesion programs. But there is a general feeling that support by the EU budget is the most natural thing, like oxygen in the air. We deserve it due to our democratic transformation path. That is the reason why more than 80% of the Polish population support European integration. But at the same time, there is no feeling of responsibility for the whole European project. If everything works fine for „us“, what is the reason to argue about it by participating in the European Parliament's elections? Input legitimacy factors, such as the European identity or participation in the European public discourse on common future, are at low levels. One may wonder about the support for the European integration with the lapse of time, when Polish society (especially middle class) will no longer enjoy direct benefits, when it will have to take more responsibility for the European project or will face typical problems existing in Western states (such as e.g. massive waves of immigration).

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